

What Talia Saw...

by Julie McMillin and Shane Hill

Talia rocked back in the saddle as she brought her mount down to a trot. As his hooves kicked up the muddy road they accompanied the drumming thought in her mind. "Thud-thud: Too late. Thud-thud: Too late. Thud-thud: Too late!"

"Bloody Spain," she muttered. She would have been back with the Band of the Twisted Claw months ago if the captain had not been afraid of Spanish pirates. "Bloody boats, bloody pirates, bloody horse!" She yanked the gelding's head up as he tried to sneak a snack of the tall grass outside the walls of Bristol.

Talia ducked low through the gates of the city and headed south. Rumor had it that the nest could be found... There. In the old oak tree behind the well was a nest with a single egg. The morning dew lay on its shell and gleamed like the Queen's ransom as the sunrise illuminated the world. The egg was too large for any bird. The rumors were true - the last dragon egg was in Bristol.

The guard beneath the egg tried to peer at her hooded face, but Talia wheeled her horse around and started the search for her camp. The city slept, for the most part, which made it easy to pick out the smell of the smoke from the cookfire. Talia trotted to the back of the wagons, expecting to find Vashta tending the fire.

"So the tale bearer returns," Thoren muttered as Talia swung out of the saddle.

'With no tales to bear,' Talia thought. "You were the last person I expected to find awake this early, Thoren."

"I found no sleep last night."

"You still cannot sleep? So, the disciples live."

"Aye." Thoren rubbed a hand through his hair and took a drink. The liquid helped his headache – but not much. "With Bloodtharken gone they should have disbanded – especially since they lost their leader."

Talia threw the saddle down next to the wagon's wheel. "After everything you've seen you still do not believe me? I told you. Simion was not the Disciple leader."

"Talia..." Thoren protested.

"No, Thoren. Hear me on this. The stories outside of Firenze..."

"...are stories. Talia, I need proof." Thoren winced as he supped from the stew. Not because of the steam from the morning cold, but because it was simply wretched.

"If the stories are just stories then tell the women of Firenze, of Florence, that they're simply imagining that no child has lived past the age of two in the past 10 years. Tell them that the story of the creature 'Body-without-soul' is just a wild tale! I am telling you, someone... some thing is making its way here."

"Talía..."

"You, yourself, still feel the disciples! You need more proof than that? Listen to yourself, Thoren!"

"I need more than stories and feelings, Talía. You know this."

"Bloody hell, Thoren! You've got one good eye - use it. The signs are all around! While I was rotting in Florence looking for your bloody proof, the camp was here, defeating Bloodtharken! I should have been here, Thoren! Here, at your side! The greatest story of our time and I was in FLORENCE!"

Thoren watched Talía run off through the morning mist. He gave her gelding a pat. "She'll be back, boy."

Talía did not return to the camp for breakfast. Nor lunch. Nor dinner – despite her stomach's protests. Dusk turned to the darkness of a new moon and still Talía sat on the little green bridge that overlooked the oak tree. The starlight illuminated the egg, safe within its nest. Talía tired of contemplating the egg and what 'might have been' and rose to trudge back to camp before she spent another cold, wet night sleeping under the stars.

A flash of light from under the tree blinded Talía. As she rubbed the spots from her vision she saw four figures under the tree, cloaked and masked. It didn't appear that they noticed her, so she crouched low and listened.

"See, Ignis, just as I said. The last dragon egg," whispered the first figure in a female voice.

"Yes, yes. And you're certain that Bloodtharken is dead?" Talía assumed that the stern voice belonged to Ignis.

"Told you, didn't I? I felt her die months ago," deliberately replied a different male voice.

"Then her curse still holds," Ignis replied. "The Disciples have a new leader and will move soon to claim the egg."

"We must see to the egg's guardian ourselves," said the last figure. Her fluid voice continued, "Only a new Champion of Elements can raise a dragon."

Talía's eyes grew wide. There was only one Champion of Elements in the history of the world. If these four were going to train a new one... then they were the Elemental Paragons. Talía gasped audibly at her realization.

Four sets of glowing eyes pierced the darkness and focused on her...